THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love

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O loving Christ / who died upon the tree
Each day and each night / I remember your love.
In my lying down / and in my rising up
In life and in death
You are my health and my peace.
Each day and each night / I remember your forgiveness
Bestowed on me so gently / and generously
Each day and each night / may I be fuller in love to you.

J. Philip Newell
"Opening Prayer and Thanksgiving"
Celtic Prayers from Iona

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THEY WILL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE

Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
John 13:35

Our hearts are full of gratitude this morning, O God, for the gift of love: the love that bore us, and fed us, and nurtured us, and taught us, and stood with us across the years. And we are grateful for the deeper love in which we live and move and have our being, expressed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your transforming love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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When a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church is completing his/her theological education, there are a number of tests, or trials we used to call them, to determine the person's fitness for ministry. Candidates must show ability in Bible content, interpretation, theology, must demonstrate a working knowledge of Presbyterian law and must present to the presbytery, a group of ministers and elders which actually does the ordaining, a personal statement of faith, a credo. It is a little unnerving, to say the least.

To reduce to writing the content of one's faith is not a particularly easy thing to do under any circumstance.

When it came time for me to do it, I recall my assumption that the safest thing would be to cover all the bases, leave no affirmation unaffirmed. So I traveled back to Pennsylvania and presented my credo, a masterpiece if I do say so myself, covering the entire sweep of Christian theology, ancient and modern, referencing the great creeds of the church, the theology of St. Paul, Augustine, John Calvin, Karl Barth, with a few carefully chosen anecdotes from the *New York Times.*

It all went well. The presbytery approved my readiness for ministry. But what I remember most about the day and what I have thought a lot about was something a retired minister said to me after the meeting. He had been a professor at Penn State – in philosophy, I think. He took me aside and complemented me on my statement of faith, making particular mention of its breadth and scope. And then he said, "Young man, the longer you live, the shorter your credo will become. But it will also become stronger and deeper. I find I believe fewer things these days but what I believe, I believe more."

New Testament scholars speculate that there is something of that going on in the life of the author of the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel According to John and in three letters that also bear his name, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John. The speculation is that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, is now a very old man. He's trying to put down the essence of what he experienced and lived years ago so that

future generations will know. And it feels as if John has concluded that what Jesus was about was love, and the new way of living he taught is about love, and the community he left behind, the community of the faithful, the church, was about love.

It is in John's Gospel that the world is given that memorable sentence, "For God so loved the world...." It is in the letter that bears his name.... "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.... We love because he first loved us." [1 John 4:7, 18, 19]

And it is in John's writing that Jesus' relationship with his disciples is most affectionate. "Little children," he calls this group of adult men and women... "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. And then this, "By this," this love you have for one another, "the world will know that you are my disciples."

Not by your wealth or power, not by the grandeur of the institutions you will build in my name, not in the elegant architecture and beautiful music you will create for me, not in your creeds and theology, not by your rigorous orthodoxy, not even by your moral purity, but by your love. The world will know who you are, that you belong to me, by the love you have for one another.

We haven't done so well with this one, have we? Jesus makes love the distinguishing characteristic of the church. But that's not what the world has seen. The history of Christianity across the centuries is a story of greed and violence. Writer Annie Dillard, in an essay she wrote on the Gospel of Luke, says,

> "What a pity, that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians...here come the Christians, flawed to the core. They set out immediately to take over the world and they pretty much did it...converted emperors, raised armies, lined their pockets with real money, and did evil things, large and small, century after century, including this one." [Alfred Corn, *Incarnations, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, p. 36]

The fact is that what the world has seen when it looked at the friends of Jesus has not always been terribly attractive. In France, where a number of us traveled a few weeks ago, the Reformed churches began to appear a decade or so after Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg. The movement spread. Its source of inspiration and energy – and ministers – was Geneva, where John Calvin preached, wrote and established an academy for the training of ministers. Calvin taught daily in the auditorium and literally hundreds came, exiles and refugees from wherever the new Reformed church encountered official hostility and persecution. The French Protestants were called Huguenots and at one time there were as many as 1,700 Huguenot congregations in France. All the blame for the tragedy of their story does not fall on one side only. They were full of enthusiasm, passionate zeal and like their successors across the centuries, not a little self-righteousness. When they were the majority they were not particularly gracious and not at all tolerant. They tarred and feathered Roman priests, killed a few, trashed churches, took particular delight in smashing statues of the Virgin Mary. The Vatican took a very dim view of their activities. The French monarchy knew that they represented a political threat. Various

efforts to reach an accommodation failed and when the Huguenots began to reach out to the Protestants in Holland who were battling Spanish oppression, something had to be done and so on August 23, 1572, starting in Paris and then moving through France, the nation turned violently against them. It was St. Bartholomew's Day. Three thousand Protestants were killed in Paris. As many as 8,000 to 10,000 were killed throughout France. Some think it was as many as 50,000. One entire congregation was slaughtered while at worship. In Paris the blood-thirsty mob was urged on by the relentless pealing of parish church bells. And when it was all over, the Pope had a medal struck and commanded bonfires to be lighted to celebrate the occasion.

"By this all will know that you are my disciples...?"

In Northern Ireland there is a fragile, beautiful peace beginning to emerge. It is something of a miracle. The British government, the Irish Government, the Sinn Fein and the largest Protestant political parties have worked hard and produced a plan which the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland seem ready to approve. The leading opponent to the plan, the most abrasive voice – is a Protestant minister, Ian Paisley, who used to be a Presbyterian and who still uses the name but was kicked out of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland years ago.

Novelist Reynolds Price, who writes affectionately about religion and wants the Christian church to be more than it is, has written a paraphrase of the story of Jesus, entitled *Three Gospels*. In it he observes,

> "Orthodox Christianity, the church, in most of its past and present forms, has defaced and even reversed whole broad aspects of Jesus' teaching....But in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and his practice than in its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts....the whores and cheats, the traitors and killers, the baffled and stunned, the social outlaw. If it is possible to discern, in the gospel... a common goal that sent the man Jesus to his agonized death, can we detect a surer aim than his first and last announced intent to sweep the lost with him into God's coming reign." [p. 33]

We live in a world that desperately needs someone to be what Jesus commanded his followers to be – a place of consistent grace and unconditional love. We live in a world that seems to be caught in a new paradigm of win /lose: every issue, every conflict, every difference of opinion reduced to a simple matter of winning and losing. Those who disagree are enemies to be destroyed. It is a hard and tough world, without much left of the traditional values of propriety and decency: a world in which a U. S. Congressman, chair of a very important committee, announces to the press that the President of the United States is a "scumbag."

Deborah Tannen, professor at Georgetown University, has written a new book, *The Argument Culture: Moving From Debate and Dialogue*, in which she says that we Americans, in our public life, are driven by a "corrosive, contentious, argument culture – attacking and destroying opponents has become the mantra of the day." [*Chicago Tribune Book Review*]

The world desperately needs what Jesus commanded his followers to be – a community of people who love one another and who show the world how to live.

William Placher, in a fine essay in the *Christian Century*, says that's what religious denominations are for – not battlefields where we fight one another over this or that until one side wins and the other slinks away in defeat – but places where theology means more than ideology or politics... "places in our society where people from widely diverse places across the political spectrum can talk about substantial issues within the context of an ongoing community of shared beliefs." Referring to the most difficult and contentious issues which threaten to divide the churches, Placher says,

> "If we can keep these conversations going, we mainline Protestants will make a major contribution to holding this fragmenting society of ours together." [*The Christian Century*, April 22-29, 1998, p. 421]

How are we going to do this? How, personally are we going to love those we don't even like. Well, as the Nike ads argue, one way is to "just do it." Just do what Jesus told us to do. Love. Start intentionally, consciously trying to be the new person Jesus wants you to be and do it by extending your love into the lives of those around you. Care. Don't turn your back. Don't shut people out. "Just do it." "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" a tourist asked a young man walking up Broadway with a violin case in his hand. "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" the tourist asked, and the young man said, "Practice, practice, practice."

How to love? Just do it.

Kathleen Norris cites a recent study of strong, lifelong marriages to determine what is different about them. The study discovered that "only one activity made a consistent difference in stable, long-lasting relationships – and that was simple affection, embracing, kissing one's beloved at the beginning and end of each day." [*The Quotidian Mysteries*, p. 80]

We have a model. "Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus defines the love we're talking about. Tough love sometimes. Challenging love sometimes – but always unconditional, inclusive, no-strings-attached love extended to them, even to Peter who will deny – Judas who will betray – John who will flee and Mary and Martha and Johanna – to each – unconditional love.

Many of us experienced something of that from mothers and fathers who loved us unconditionally, which simply means loved us when we weren't lovable, when we didn't deserve that love, when we were obnoxious, and mean, and perhaps even hateful ... when no one else in the world could or would have loved us. Some of us were blessed by that and some of us who did not experience it know its reality and its power by its absence in our story.

Jesus is the model, but he is more than an example to follow. He is God's love. He is God loving each of us unconditionally, loving us in spite of who we are and what we may have done.

That's what old John wanted to get down on the page for future generations. And that's what church, at its best, is about: a community of people, some of whom don't know one another, some of whom don't particularly like each other, but all of whom know something of God's gracious love extended to all and the importance to live that love together.

Sometimes it breaks through, not always, to be sure, but enough to assure me of its truth and beauty and power.

On the next to last day of our trip to retrace the Huguenot story, we were in Geneva. We had visited the magnificent Reformation Monument, Calvin's church and the auditorium where he taught, and after hearing the terrible story of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France, we had learned about the great Reformer's capacity for intolerance and cruelty, how a man by the name of Servetus, condemned to die as a heretic, came to Geneva and how Calvin had him arrested and burned at the stake. And I expect all of us were weary of it all, wondering if there was enough good on the other side of the ledger to balance all this intolerance and hatred and bloodshed.

There was a concert that night in the Cathedral of St. Peter, Calvin's church, now Reformed, presented by the Copenhagen Boys' Choir. The music was sublime. The starkly beautiful gothic church was lighted elegantly. The experience blessed us as soon as we settled in our pew. And then I noticed that the concert was a benefit for the L'Arche Communities, the wonderful residential care program in France for mentally handicapped adults. I was familiar with L'Arche because Henri Nouwen lived in one of the communities and wrote eloquently about it. And then I saw what I had not noticed. In the pew in front of us were six mentally handicapped adults from a L'Arche community nearby. They were dressed neatly in their best clothes. They were taking care of one another, exhibiting, I thought, an unusual amount of concern for each other. One man made sure the others knew where we were in the program. And when the Danish boys sang, they sat absolutely quietly, listing raptly to the glorious music and then applauding enthusiastically.

And I thought to myself, "Thank you, God, that sometimes it happens. Sometimes this so very human institution actually listens. Sometimes your people actually hear the new commandment and do it. Thank you."

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Amen.